Hix dairy is best producing farm

Hixburg is the center of eastern Appomattox County's Grade A dairy country. And at the heart of Hixburg is the Hix Brothers Dairy, Appomattox County's highest-producing dairy operation.

The Hix Brothers Dairy Farm, which was featured in the 1982 Virginia Farm Management Tour, is run by John and William Hix, William's son Danny and John's sons David, Tom and Jim. The farm has been in the Hix family since before the Civil War.

There are currently 135 cows on test at the Hix Dairy farm and the average per-animal milk production level is more than 17,000 pounds per year.

The farm features a double-six herringbone pit milking parlor which makes for faster, more efficient day-to-day milking operations.

One reason the Hix brothers dairy has become the top producing dairy operation in Appomattox County is the brothers' progressive approach to dairying.

For example, the Hixes are currently cutting alfalfa for silage. "We're using some that we cut last year for feed," notes John. "We're not sure now how it will test," for food value, John adds. but he notes that it is easier to produce than standard corn silage.

Another progressive step being taken on the Hix farm is construction of an earth manure storage facility. A large pit which will hold up to six months of manure from the cows' holding and feed lots has been dug. A concrete spillway will be built at the end of the concrete apron leading to the feeding lot, so that the manure can be pushed by tractor directly into the pit.

The earth manure storage pit will provide a collection point for the cow manure, and it will save time, since it will eliminate the necessity of hauling the manure away on a regular basis. It will also make for more efficient use of the natural fertilizer, since it can be stored for use on fields when they are not covered with crops. Plans call for installation of a pump at the pit, which will be used for lifting the manure into a spreader for placement on the fields.

"This time of year, its hard to find a place to put the manure," says John, "because there are crops on almost all of the land. The pit will help us get better use of the manure."

The Hixes have also installed several sod waterways on their farm, regularly use strip cropping to resist top soil erosion and are strong advocates of no-till corn planting.

The farm also has a cattle watering system which features underground drainage and provides a strong supply of water for the cows and for washing the milking parlor after it is used.

William Hix, who is active in church and community organizations, has served for several years on the Appomattox County Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Committee and is currently vice-president of the Appomattox Dairymen's Association.

John has served as president and vice-president of the Appomattox County Farm Bureau, president of the Appomattox Dairymen's Association and was chairman of the 1982 Virginia Farm Management Tour.

John has also served as a director of the Old Dominion division of Dairymen, Inc., the dairy co-op which markets most of the milk produced in Appomattox County.

Realizing the need for constantly expanding the market for milk and for promoting its use, John says he is excited with the prospects for market expansion created by a new product developed by Dairymen, Inc. Ultra high temperature (UHTG) milk can be stored up to three months unrefrigerated. The product is grade A fresh fluid milk, straight from the dairy farm, which is flash heated to 280 degrees farenheit, then cooled quickly to 70 degrees. The process retains the milk's high quality and flavor without preservatives or artificial additives.

The UHT milk is packaged in special half-pint and quart containers made of five layers of plastic, aluminum foil and paper. The package seals out light and air which normally reduce shelf life. Once the package is opened, like many other packaged goods, the milk needs normal refrigeration to retain maximum freshness.

John notes that the extra-long-life will enable shipment of milk to markets overseas, which, due to the cost of refrigerated shipment, have previously been out of reach of U.S. milk producers.

The Kenneth Doss farm

Kenneth Doss's dairy farm includes 65 cows, 40 of which are currently being milked, which produce an average of 58,000 pounds of Grade A milk per month.

Kenneth Doss got into the dairy business in 1959. The farm is the home place of Kenneth's wife, Ida. It was started as a dairy operation by Mr. and Mrs. C. S. Cawthorn, Sr. Kenneth and Ida took over the operation from Ida's parents, Captain and Annie C. Covington.

Like most of the dairy farms in Appomattox, the Doss farm is a family effort, with all members of the family pitching in to help.

"I remember milking cows in a wide open field, by hand, using a bucket," recalls Ida. "We went from that to cans with cold water vats, then to a milking stanchion."

Ida recalls that her father, Captain Covington, helped build many of the milk stanchions in the county.

The Doss farm this year has 58 acres of corn for grain feed and silage, as well as orchardgrass and alfalfa hay. There are approximately 7,000 bales of hay in storage on the Doss farm.

The Dosses keep three Holstein bulls on their farm, and, unlike most of the other dairy operations in the county, they do not use artificial insemination to produce replacement animals.

IDA DOSS, the wife of Appomattox dairyman Kenneth Doss, examines a newly-born Holstein calf.

"We use all natural fertilization on this farm," noted Ida, "the way nature intended it to be."

The Harris Dairy

Richard Harris remembers the first check he received for milk production. "It was for a grand total of $33," he recalls.

Richard started selling milk in 1945, when he milked by hand and farmed without the benefit of electricity. He has since turned the Grade A dairy operation over to his sons, E. M. and Earl but he still helps with the farming chores.

The Harris dairy operation covers about 120 acres, and the Harrises are currently milking about 60 cows.

The cows each produce about 50 pounds of milk per day, on a typical diet of silage, grain and a variety of types of hay.

The Harrises grow alfalfa totalling about 12,000 bales a year, enough to feed their herd. This year, they had some problems with chickweed, which they overcame by spraying the crop with paraquat.

Chickweed, if left unchecked, chokes out and smothers alfalfa which is "very high in protein," according to R.M.

Along with alfalfa, which Richard notes is the "king of hay", the Harrises grow their own corn for silage and grain, as well as some oats and barley.

MRS. ABBITT COLEMAN mans the tractor, as son Keith and friend Kent Hancock (on trailer in rear) prepare to load bales of oat hay for transportation to the barn. The Coleman farm uses oats for hay almost exclusively.

Coleman's cows like their oats

Abbitt Coleman joined his father-in-law, Gus Torrence, on his Appomattox County farm in 1951, shortly before the dairy operation went to Grade A.

"When I first started on the farm, we had one tractor and two horses to work with", Abbitt recalls.

The farm was established around the turn of the century by Gus' father, John Torrence.

Abbitt took over the operation of the farm upon Gus' retirement. Gus passed away in 1979. Today Abbitt runs the operation with his son Keith, and help from his son-in-law, Arthur Morris, his daughter Nelwyn, and his wife.

The 200 acre farm holds approximately 100 head of cattle. Abbitt says he averages milking about 50 cows. At present he is milking 40.

The Colemans have 50 acres of corn planted this year, most of which is cut up for silage. "I grind very little of the corn, and what I do is used to feed the heifers," Abbitt says.

One interesting aspect of the Coleman farm is that oats are used almost exclusively for hay. Oats are high in protein and nutrients and generally ranked second only to alfalfa for their value as cattle hay.

"We've had good luck raising oats," Abbitt says. "We get a good bales-per-acre yield, averaging about 100 bales per acre," he notes.

Of course, there are problems associated with raising the oats.If the oats are not baled very soon after they are cut, they run the risk of being rained on, which causes them to lose some of their protein value.

Also, the oats must be harvested when the grain is in soft phase. If the grain hardens, its feed quality is reduced, and in storage it is more likely to draw rats.

Another problem associated with oats is the pesky cereal leaf beetle, which likes to eat oats as much as dairy cattle do.

"We had a time with them this year," Abbitt says in reference to the beetles. "We had to get a man to spray the fields in a cropduster airplane."

The Colemans enjoy life on the dairy farm, and on a given evening, you are likely to see the whole family in the fields getting in the hay or around the barn working on milking operations.

"There's plenty to do around a dairy farm," Abbitt says. "We'll never have to worry about being unemployed. You don't make a lot of money at it, but dairying is a good life. We enjoy it."

'Dunn Roamin" home for Barger Dairy

Henry Barger came to Appomattox County from his native Bland County in 1951. Three years later he went into the dairy business on his farm, "Dunn Roamin'". He had concentrated on raising beef cattle before then and still keeps a beef herd of 45 cows and 15 beef heifers.

Barger is currently milking 30 cows and gets an average of 40 pounds of milk per day from each animal. "They are slowing down a little now with the hot weather," he notes. "Cows usually don't produce as well when it gets hot as they do in cooler weather."

He does most of the milking himself, and he handles the artificial breeding chores on the 196 acre farm.

Like many of the dairymen in Appomattox County, Barger believes the recently imposed 50-cent-per-hundred tax on dairy farmers is inequitable. "Virginia has not had a milk surplus to speak of for three years," he notes. "That 50-cent tax just about takes a man's profit, especially a smaller dairy farmer."

Barger raises corn silage, and several types of grain. He buys about half of his hay and raises the other half, mostly oats and some fescue and orchardgrass.

Barger notes that dairy farming is a seven-day-a-week, 365-day-a-year job. "The cows have to be fed, milked, and you have to be there to do it, period." he says.

He and his wife Louise thoroughly enjoy farm like, however. As Louise points out, "there's no substitute for the peace and quiet on this farm. I wouldn't trade it for anything."

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Appomattox Animal Hospital
W.M. BURGER, JR., DVM

Covington Farm

Eddie Covington's 583 acre became a full-time dairy operation in 1950, when Henry Covington, Eddie's father, converted his farming operation to milk production.

The farm which is located near Hixburg is currently producing milk from 37 cows. "We have eight dry cows right now, and 15 heifers that will come fresh this fall during the base period," Eddie says.

Eddie, who has been milking cows for 30 years, is one of many farmers in Appomattox County who uses Dairy Herd Improvement Association (DHIA) records to help upgrade the quality of his herd.

A DHIA representative visits the farm each month, checks the herd, weighs the milk, and records other data pertinent to dairy herd management.

Eddie receives a computer read-out from DHIA which lists each cow's production record, the levels of protein and buttterfat in each cow's milk, the number of days each year the cow is producing milk and other facts valuable in managing the herd.

"For example, " Eddie notes, "knowing what percentage of protein and fat are in a cow's milk helps me determine what to feed the cows for best results."

The average milk-production level for Covington's cows is 45 pounds per day per cow.

This year, Covington has 123 acres of corn. He says he will use about 50 acres of the corn for silage and the rest will be picked for feed grain. He also planted 25 acres of barley hay, 15 of which were put in a silo and 10 of which were thrashed for grain, which is mixed with the corn to feed the cattle.